

# Ethics and Boundaries

What are ethics? Write what that word means to you. \_\_\_\_\_

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Where do ethics come from? \_\_\_\_\_

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Can you think of some ethical guidelines that might apply to your work as a Peer Support Provider? \_\_\_\_\_

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*Most ethical systems have their foundation in religion and philosophy. In Western civilization, that means Judeo-Christian tradition and ancient European philosophers. Every profession has its own set of ethical guidelines specific to its practice and its place in society. There are ethical guidelines for doctors, nurses, social workers, lawyers, accountants, architects, fire and police workers, judges: every profession that involves work with other people in which the professional is greatly trusted.*



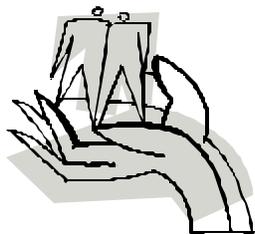
Ethics are a code of behavior that guides our actions at work. Ethical guidelines may also affect how we act when we are not actually working, but others see us as a representative of our employer or our work role. For instance, a doctor will honor the ethical guidelines of his profession while he is performing as a doctor, but he will also behave ethically in other settings

in which he is known to be a physician. As Peer Support Providers, we will observe a set of ethical guidelines while we are working, but we will also behave ethically in public when we are known to be Peer Support Providers, or to work for a certain agency. It's especially important to remember this in our off-work activities when peer support workers are new to your community. You can be sure that people will be watching to see if we can really do the work we've been given, or, in fact, if we can really recover enough to work at all. We want to be sure that others get a favorable impression about Peer Support Providers.

Is there a difference between ethics and boundaries? In some codes of ethics, boundaries are spelled out very clearly and any behavior contrary to those guidelines is considered an ethical violation. However, some boundaries will be up to you to decide. The ethical standards that apply to you are the "hard and fast" rules that must be honored. Boundaries will involve some good judgment on your part.

What ethical guidelines apply to Peer Support Providers? There are two categories:

- ① Ethics that apply to peer workers in general, and
- ② Those that are specific to your employer



***Peer Support Provider Ethics:***

These ethical guidelines will apply no matter where you work, in any kind of setting, as a Peer Support Provider. These ethical standards reflect your role as a Peer Support Provider, your philosophy of care, and your role on the service team.

⊕ *Honor the dignity of each person.* Be sure to remember that each person receiving services is already a whole human being with a full range of strengths and challenges. Take care not to be disrespectful or patronizing. Having a mental illness does not mean we lose the ability to understand (with rare and occasional exceptions), and most of the time we can still make decisions. Nobody likes to be treated like a child. What other things should we watch for in observing this ethical standard? \_\_\_\_\_

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⊕ *Never use your position to take advantage of people.* While we try hard not to exercise power over those we serve, in reality we do have an advantage based on our status as employees, the fact that we receive a paycheck, and our status in recovery (which may be farther along than the person we're serving—or may not). It may be all right for your peer to buy you a cup of coffee, or even cook you a meal at home, but it's probably not a good idea to let them do it all the time. If you allow the person receiving services to treat you to something small, return the favor. Small tokens of friendship are okay; actual gifts are not. The people who are our peers are in our life so that we can share our experience and knowledge with them, and to allow them to grow and recover through that relationship. They are not in our life so that they can work for us, clean our house, baby-sit our children, drive us around, keep us company when we're lonely, or in any other way meet needs that we should meet on our own as adults. Getting our own needs met is a byproduct of doing this work, not the main reason we become Peer Support Providers. In what other ways must we avoid taking advantage of people? \_\_\_\_\_

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⊕ *Any kind of sexual contact or intimate relationship between Peer Support Provider and the person they serve is absolutely off limits.* This is an extension of not taking advantage of people, but it's SO important that we include it as a separate standard. Since sex and intimacy have such a powerful impact on us as human beings, we must be especially careful in this area. Sexual contact means any type of intimate touch, kissing, suggestive talk, nudity, or conversations about sex, as well as actual sexual relations. Peer Support Providers must not date the people they serve, or continue to provide services with the "understanding" that when the work relationship has ended, there will be an intimate relationship. When we try to have an intimate relationship with a peer, we lose the ability to be effective in providing services. In addition, we destroy the trust that is the foundation of peer work. In regard to this ethical standard, our behavior must be impeccably clean and honorable. What else must we avoid about intimacy? \_\_\_\_\_

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*Documentation must always be complete and accurate.* Falsifying records or omitting important events is not only an unethical practice; in many cases it's also breaking the law. We may be tempted to record things in a way that's not quite accurate, or to leave out things, for many reasons.

Perhaps we forgot to do something we were supposed to do. Or maybe something happened during our time together that felt like a failure. Will anyone know if your documentation isn't accurate? Maybe not. But if someone else does know, the consequences could be terrible. If, for instance, the person receiving services has talked to us about a plan for suicide, we should not only talk to our supervisor but also document that. We may have worked with that person extensively and felt confident that the person was safe, and so forgotten to tell the supervisor or to record it. What if the person makes a suicide attempt, even a completed one? If we didn't document the person's suicide plan and tell our supervisor, we may have missed an opportunity to help someone in need. In addition, if there is an investigation or a lawsuit and someone learns that our records were not complete, the consequences could be much more severe than if we had simply told someone in the first place. Everyone makes mistakes, and no one expects us to be perfect. We are expected to talk it over with our supervisor when things don't go the way we planned. What other things might we be tempted to leave out of documentation? \_\_\_\_\_

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# *Each person's records and information must be kept confidential.* The agency that employs you will have specific guidelines to help you observe this guideline. Generally speaking, any information you learn about the person you serve can be revealed only to your supervisor, any other person working directly with you to serve that person, and the person at your agency responsible for maintaining the files. Without specific permission, you may not reveal any information about the person to family members (theirs or yours), friends, other providers, educational institutions, or anyone else who asks for information. Be careful about conversations with coworkers to be sure nobody else can hear you. Don't talk about your work outside of your job. There are strict federal guidelines about getting permissions to reveal information; always check with your employer about the proper way to do that.

⊕ *Using any kind of drugs (illegal or legal) or alcohol with the people we serve is off limits. Buying drugs or alcohol from or for the person we serve is also off limits.* The agency that employs you may have guidelines about your personal use of alcohol or drugs, but whatever it is, we may not use drugs or alcohol with the person receiving services. There may be legal issues involved with illegal drugs. Since we know that using alcohol or drugs can make it harder to recover from symptoms of mental illness, we certainly wouldn't encourage that behavior by using with them. Obtaining drugs or alcohol for someone, or buying it from them, could leave us open to criminal prosecution. Regardless of the legal issues, any behavior on our part that encourages the use of alcohol or drugs by the person receiving services is clearly *not* in their best interest. What kinds of issues might arise around this ethical standard? \_\_\_\_\_

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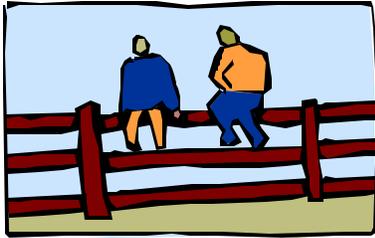
*Peer Support Providers are not qualified to diagnose, give medical advice or recommend medications. Therefore, we avoid talking about medical issues in any way except to share our own experience.* When sharing our experience, we should be clear that all we know about it is our own experience, and someone else might have a very different experience than we have had. We can listen to the person we serve if they have concerns or difficulties with their medications or other medical services. We can help them prepare to talk with their physician or teach them to advocate for their needs. Our role must always stop short of making specific recommendations for specific medications or treatments. How else might we be tempted to give medical advice? \_\_\_\_\_

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⊕ *Ethics specific to your employer.* Each agency will have a specific code of ethics that governs its employees, depending upon its mission statement, its particular tasks, its funding sources, and the state and local laws. You will probably be introduced to this code of ethics when you are first hired. If not, ask about the ethical standards that govern your job.



### ***Boundaries***

While ethics are a specific code that tells us exactly what our behavior must be, boundaries are more general guidelines. Some of our boundaries will be based upon the expectations of our job. Some will be based upon our own personal values and choices.

What are some of your personal boundaries? \_\_\_\_\_

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What do you think might be some useful boundaries in working as a Peer Support Provider? \_

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Some professions include boundary guidelines in their code of ethics. For example, the code of ethics for the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) states that social workers must not engage in “dual or multiple relationships” (Reamer, p. 269). A social worker should not have a professional relationship with a person who is also a business associate, a neighbor, a relative, or a friend. This boundary protects clients from possible conflicts of interest on the part of the social worker.

Peer Support Providers may have a little more freedom in that area. Our relationship with peers is different: we have less authority and less power. Our interactions are less directive. Because we are not in a position to be making decisions for people, our objectivity is less crucial. Therefore, we are sometimes able to be with people in ways that other professionals cannot. What would you think about providing services to a neighbor? As a PSP, that might be an option for you, as long as both you and your neighbor are comfortable with that arrangement. In fact, you might be the very best person to act as PSP because you already have a trusting relationship with that person. There are some limits to this; it would not be possible to act as PSP to a family member or partner. It is simply impossible to untangle ourselves from our role as family member or partner and act only in our role as PSP. Your employer may have guidelines about this. If not, use your very best judgment, always keeping the best interest of the person receiving services at the forefront.



There are many ways in which our boundaries may be challenged as Peer Support Providers. You will need to find a balance between your own needs and the needs of the person you serve. Here are some questions that may come up for you. Unless your employer has guidelines about these issues, you can choose to do these things or not. How will you respond?

I want to give my home phone number to this person. \_\_\_\_\_

The person I'm serving loves to cook and says she never has company. She wants to fix lunch for me. \_\_\_\_\_

I can see that my peer always struggles to make ends meet on disability. I'd like to buy him some groceries. \_\_\_\_\_

I know that this person loves the outdoors, but never gets a chance to get out of the city. I could take her camping. \_\_\_\_\_

I really need to paint my fence, but my peer wants me to come over. He's offered to help me paint. \_\_\_\_\_

I've been working with this person for three months, and now my assignment is over. I would like to continue to be friends with my peer. \_\_\_\_\_

The person I'm serving knows a little bit about my story, because I've shared it. Now she's asking questions about my sexual orientation and dating preferences (because the peer is also exploring those issues personally). \_\_\_\_\_

As a Peer Support Provider, you could have answered "okay" to any of those questions and probably been able to stay within ethical parameters. Because there are a lot of gray areas and fewer strict "do's" and "don'ts" than in other professions, we must think carefully and exercise our judgment when making these kinds of decisions. Ask yourself these questions when thinking through a boundary issue:

- ☞ Am I making this decision because I'm uncomfortable?
- ☞ Am I making this decision because I'm sure it's best for the peer?
- ☞ Have I asked questions and checked it out with the other person?
- ☞ Am I denying them an opportunity to act responsibly or to grow into a healthy role?
- ☞ Am I saying "yes" or "no" because it's too hard to figure out what would be best?
- ☞ How might I be limiting my usefulness to this person by this decision?
- ☞ How might I be limiting their growth by this decision?
- ☞ Is this something I can negotiate with the person receiving services?
- ☞ Who can I check with before I make my final decision?

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## References

Reamer, Frederic G. (1998). *Ethical Standards in Social Work: A Critical Review of the NASW Code of Ethics*. Washington, D.C.: NASW Press.

## Documentation

No matter where you work as a Peer Support Provider, you will be asked to document your work in some way. The details of that will depend on your particular job. However, there are some practices specific to work as a peer that you will wish to incorporate into your documentation, no matter where you work.



Remember that we are *peers*, not experts. We document what happened and what we actually saw, not what we judge to be true.

Peer Support Providers are qualified to provide support, referrals, encouragement, hope. We are *not* qualified to diagnose or make recommendations about medication or treatments.

In a recovery environment, people have the right to information. Document your work in a way that you would be happy to show to the person receiving services. If you can, create the documentation of your work *with* the person receiving services. Sit down together and decide what you want to say about your time together.

If it is not documented, it did not happen. This is an old saying that reminds us that writing down our work is crucial. Documentation is important for consistency of services, for legal purposes, for billing. You do not need to write every detail of what happened, but do not leave out anything important.

Some days, things don't go the way we had hoped. If you did something that might be considered a "mistake," do not be afraid to put it into the documentation. In fact, "mistakes" are even more important to document. If you decide not to write down some mishap that occurs, and later the person decides to file a complaint or lawsuit against you, you will have no protection. Besides, "mistakes" are our best teachers. Be honest about what happens.



### ***But What Should I Say?***

Have you ever seen your records? If you have seen your own or someone else's records, you have an idea about what professionals write in the files. Because we have a different role on the service team, we're going to write our documentation a little differently.

*Names:* You may be used to seeing "client" or "patient" to refer to the person receiving services. Get in the habit of using the person's name. This is a simple habit that reminds us always that we are writing about a *real person*, not just some generic textbook person with no individuality. You can't go wrong when you call someone by their name. It's much more personal than using "client" or "consumer."

*Assumptions:* Be careful about making assumptions that turn into judgments. Let's say you go to Joe's house at 1:00 in the afternoon for your appointment. Joe answers the door in his pajamas, with his hair messy and his face unwashed. He seems quiet and doesn't talk much. It would be easy to assume that Joe is experiencing increased symptoms of depression and so didn't get out of bed. But maybe Joe spent the night with a sick friend who had to go to the hospital, and he took a quick nap before you got there. Before you jump to the conclusion that you know what's happening, ask some friendly questions. You might say, "Gee, Joe, I notice that you seem to be just getting up. Were you up late?"

*Details:* We don't need to write a book, and we don't need to prepare a complete assessment. Peer Support Providers are not trained to evaluate or assess individuals. We document the things we did, any goals that were set, and any progress made toward those goals. We also document anything out of the ordinary or unexpected. Documentation helps ensure consistency of services, reminding all of us where we are headed and how much progress we have made to date.

*Teamwork:* Chances are, at some point you will have a coworker (or work with someone else on the service team) that you don't particularly like. That work relationship is a separate issue from what happens with the person receiving services. Do *not* document other people's work in your records. Do not use your documentation to "snitch" on other workers. If you have issues with someone else's work, take it up with your supervisor.

*Emergencies:* You may encounter an urgent situation when working with someone, such as a person feeling suicidal or an accident or injury. Be sure to document what you know about this, but take action immediately. This is just common sense. You would not wait for your supervisor or other team members to read the files to find out that the person receiving services might be feeling suicidal. Don't wait to report an incident that needs immediate attention.

*Relax:* Documentation is important, but it's not like writing a doctoral thesis. Spelling and formatting are not graded. Pretend you are telling someone verbally about your day. Don't worry about highly technical language; your own words are quite good enough.

Many agencies use computer systems to document work. These systems are usually easy to learn. Ask for help when you aren't sure what to write or how to use the system. We don't have to muddle through things on our own; there will always be someone we can ask for support or suggestions.



## Site Specific Training

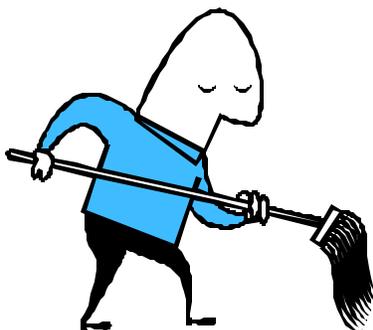
Every setting in which Peer Support Providers work is unique. Your duties and what your position requires in responsibility, documentation, facilitation, and working with people will vary. Some of this you will learn when you go through an orientation process after hire. Some of what you need to know will be learned while you are on the job. In fact, your whole working life should become a learning experience, one in which you continuously develop your skills and your responsibilities. As you fully participate in your employment, make efforts to learn new things, become an eager and dependable employee, and your value as an employee will continuously increase. Your employer will be able to count on your willingness and your enthusiasm.

Everything that you learn during this training class will be used at some point in your work. Your particular job may use more skills that are one-to-one centered. You may be in a position where you spend the bulk of your time facilitating classes. It will be up to your employer to designate your particular responsibilities. However, it will be up to you to bring excellence to your work.

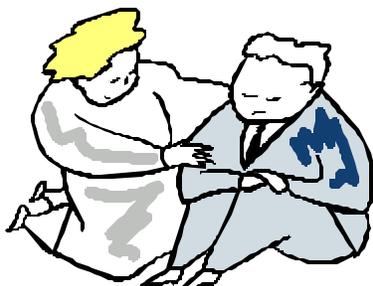


If you are required to document information, become skillful at recognizing what is important to note about an encounter with someone you are serving. Remember to always come from a strengths perspective. Remember that you will also be the model of recovery for those you serve and your coworkers. It is vital that you be aware of how easy it is to begin to lose sight of your recovery or strengths-based perspective. The moment you begin to believe that you can never lose your unique perspective, is the moment it is in jeopardy. Be aware of your language and

your belief in people’s strengths at all times. Be ready to catch yourself when you use a word like...”non-compliant.”



Part of your job may be to help keep your surroundings clean. Do this safely and taking all the precautions you learn in your New Hire Orientation. Wear rubber gloves, use cleaning supplies appropriately. Even if your job requires you to clean from time to time, do it with a heart that remembers when you were in surroundings that did not feel clean and fresh. Clean surroundings help people maintain dignity. We want the people we serve to have dignity.



If part of your job **requires** (this may be something that you are unable to do) you to participate in “a take-down,” and “seclusion,” or a “restraint episode,” you can be there for the person, perhaps you have had a similar experience. Help them avoid it by letting them know that you are there, that you understand the pain of their symptoms or of not feeling heard, or perhaps of wanting to harm themselves. Your calm presence can reassure them. You must also help your coworkers to understand that the work you do can be done without seclusion and restraint or any coercive activities. You know from experience what it is like to have frightening symptoms, to know that no one is listening to you. Help your team brainstorm ways of helping that will calm down the situation before any coercive action occurs. There are many examples of agencies that accomplished zero restraint. It is not an impossible dream.



If your position requires you to handle calls on a crisis line, you will want to develop your skills around crisis intervention. You will want to become an excellent communicator. Remember that one of the most important skills of a good communicator is that of listening. Be ready to listen. Always draw upon your lived experience to help you remain empathic and connected with the person on the other end of the phone even if it is the fifth time they have called that night. Think of the lonely hours you spent while you were struggling with symptoms. Remember that you too had scary thoughts that you thought you could not share because they were too “crazy.” Remember that sometimes the people we serve have no one in their lives to give them support. So, that is your job, your unique perspective to share. You might be the first person to ever tell that caller they can get better. Every time someone lives to call again, it is a success. There can never be too much calling or reaching out. Every single time we get a call, or we meet with someone, we have the chance to be beside them as they make a choice to begin to get better.

The skills you will learn here are universal. Each agency that employs you will have specific tasks, perspectives, policies and procedures for you to follow and accomplish. As you participate in your site-specific training, remember to share your unique strengths-based perspective. You are a unique and wonderful treasure so share the wisdom and caring that you bring to your job.

## Supervising Peer Support Providers

As your own skills as a Peer Support Provider develop, you may ask or be asked to move into a supervisory position. Or, you may be a professional who is reading this because you are supervising people with psychiatric diagnoses. There are some important things to remember about supervising people who are working in recognized consumer positions.

First, we are people. We are people just like anyone else. We have challenges that make it difficult for us to work at times, but most of us are committed to working and making a difference. This makes us workers with an intense drive to do a good job.

Second, for some of us, this is the first time we have ever worked. Perhaps we have been told all of our lives that we should not work. Perhaps we never believed we could work or that we had anything of value to give. The fears and self-doubt associated with this type of life experience will make us vulnerable. It makes us vulnerable in the sense that if you criticize our work, we may hear, “You never do anything right.” even if you are saying, “If you did this in another way, it might work better.” It will take some time for our belief in our abilities to develop and become real to us. However, just like all employees, PSPs must be held accountable for their conduct on the job.

Third, we may feel that we have to continue a pattern of having to leave jobs because that is what has always occurred in the past. We may have simply left jobs when we felt vulnerable or as if we had made a mistake. So, we may come to you and want to quit or just stop showing up. This will be an important time for you to stop and really think about what is happening. It may be very frustrating for you to work with someone who starts failing to show up when you need them most. However, it will be a time when it is vital to create an open dialogue about what is happening. Create a safe environment for the person to really talk about what is going on. Help them to understand that everyone makes mistakes, feels afraid, and wants to run away at times and that you are willing to help them move past this point.



If you are not a person with a diagnosis and you are supervising people who have a diagnosis, it is important that you allow them to bring their specific knowledge to your gatherings and meetings. It is important that you create a setting where change can occur. Your other staff may not be ready to work with people who have a diagnosis on an equal basis. However, with your leadership, your staff can learn to see that consumer staff can bring viewpoints and information they might never know or understand fully and completely.

Understand that change, even wonderful change, is hard for people. Frequently, people who have done work in a particular way for a long time do not want to change the way they do things even if the new way is better or easier. You may encounter fault-finding and blaming. You may see your consumer staff minimized, harassed, and discounted. It will be up to you to create a setting that respects the input of consumer staff and that empowers them to be equal members of your team.

The movement to employ consumers in settings that have traditionally employed only professional staff is going forward. People working with others who have had similar experiences has worked in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous for years (AA since 1935, NA since 1953). Bosom Buddies was begun in the 1980's as a support for women who have breast cancer. The support people are other women who have experienced the trauma

of a diagnosis of breast cancer. Many on-line chat groups have been developed with a peer-to-peer helping perspective. All of this has occurred because peer-to-peer support works.



If you are a recognized consumer who has been promoted to a position that requires you to supervise your peers, congratulations! The setting that you work in has recognized your abilities and all that you have to offer. If you are in a management position, your agency probably has created a safe environment where you are able to be everything you are. The staff may or may not fully support you, but you have proven that you can do good work.

As you move to a more responsible position, it will be imperative that you monitor your symptoms and take care of yourself. You will be counted on to do a good job by others. You have proven that you are a great worker. However, you must continue to stay focused on the part of you that understands your peers and coworkers.

## ***KEEP YOUR WORK RELATIONSHIPS PROFESSIONAL YET GENTLE AND KIND!***

Do not begin to use language about your coworkers that is demeaning. Do not fear for your position by keeping them from succeeding. The more one of us succeeds, the more we all succeed. As you nurture and support the people you supervise, they will grow and develop their skills just as you did. When they are ready, let them move up and on. Let them try new things and learn. It is important to everyone that their job is interesting and that they are given the opportunity to participate and be creative in their work. When you fear success in one of the people you supervise, you slow down progress throughout this entire process.

If someone is having difficulty, invite them in to make a plan about how to address the things that are difficult. Listen carefully as they identify the issues they are facing and how they might move beyond them. Do not take a stance of telling people what to do. In this way, you allow them to be the managers of their own life and work. If you tell them how to feel better about their job, you have not allowed them to go through the problem solving process. In this way, it is almost like a treatment plan that you made for them...it is your plan. When people create their own plans in every aspect of their lives, they feel more committed and empowered.

### Let's do a role play...



**Person #1:** You are the supervisor and a Peer Support Provider has just come to you wishing to turn in their resignation. The person recently had been late a couple of days in a row. Other than that their work with the people you serve is very good. You are confused but want to try to help this person through this rough spot and see them keep working.

**Person #2:** You have been working for three months. You are really feeling good about your skills as a Peer Support Provider. This is the longest you have ever worked. You cannot place it, but you have a feeling of fear about making a mistake now every day before work. You have been late twice. You feel it is best to leave now.

***If you are observing this process, try to see places where the supervisor is helpful. Identify ways that could be helpful that did not occur. Think about why that employee wants to leave now. Write down some thoughts:***

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- \* Is this familiar to anyone?
- \* What was your experience?
- \* How did you get through it?
- \* What kept you from getting through it?

In the role play you just observed, what did you see that was helpful? What might you have done? Why? What if you were a supervisor with very little patience, how might that impact the process we just observed? What if the employee was a great advocate for others, but could not advocate on their own behalf? How might that change the outcome?

***Let's discuss it....***

Make a list of characteristics that identify a good supervisor:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_

Do you possess these qualities? Could you develop these qualities in yourself?



What qualities make a good employee? Do you possess these qualities? Could you develop these qualities in yourself? Could you help someone develop these qualities? List some things that you identify as areas for growth in yourself as both an employee and a supervisor.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_

Use this list as a way to measure growth, not shortcomings. Whatever you feel you need to learn, you can learn. We should continue to learn all of our working life.

**Role Play:**

**Person #1:** Imagine that you are a supervisor and you are telling one of your peer employees that they have done a great job.

**Person #2:** You are an employee who is called into your supervisor's office. You fear the worst. Even though you do not know what you have done, you are still very concerned. You are not used to positive feedback.

As you watch, please make notes about your observations. What worked well? How could the process be improved? What are some difficulties that exist even with telling someone they are doing a good job?

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When working with any employees, it is important to be sincere in our feedback. When feedback is given it should not be patronizing or shallow. When there is positive feedback to be given,

give it freely. A happy, secure, and respected employee will work harder and be more committed to their work. When an employee is properly compensated and receives praise when it is due, that employee will enjoy their work and feel valued and appreciated. Never let your fear of someone else's abilities make you feel that you should withhold praise and make them feel that their hard work goes unnoticed and unappreciated. ***“Good job!”... two great words that should be used often.***

